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*THE PRIESTLY FUNCTION IN THE MODERN CHURCH*

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It is not with conceit but by constraint that one ventures to write on the priestly function in the modern church. Can anything new be said about it? Can anything be said at all without wounding the sensibilities and adding to the burdens—already too heavy—of the modern minister? Criticism there must be, construction there ought to be, in any discussion of this subject. But both criticism and construction will be inevitably and deeply affected by the temperament of the writer. So at the outset you are asked to believe that, however dogmatic this discussion may at times appear, it is carried on in the perfect awareness that there is another side to most of the questions that will arise, and that excuses and even justifications may be urged for some of the tendencies upon which those who have cultivated a religious scrupulousness in such matters look with increasing dismay.

I

Throughout the long history of mankind two types of men have confronted each other: the priest and the prophet. They have not always understood each other, and sometimes they have been in open and violent antagonism. Historically, they stand for contrasted, though not necessarily for contradictory, ideals of life. The priest, as the divinely endowed administrator of the grace of God, has always feared and many times hated the prophet with his direct appeal to the free spirit, the questioning intellect, and the active conscience of the individual. To the priest, as above defined, God is always mediated, and the thought of an immediate experience of the Eternal Spirit in the soul is the rankest sort of blasphemy. Always it is God *and* something other: God and the symbol, God and the institution, God and the celebrant himself. Absolving penitents, offering sacrifices, imper-

sonating Deity, boldly taking upon himself holy functions which in the New Testament are either concentrated uniquely in Jesus Christ or diffused throughout the church universal, the priest has exerted a blighting influence upon the church for centuries. The enemy of true religion, the subverter of true morality, the destroyer of all liberty, the caricature of the Christian minister where ministry is most divine—that is the priest as history largely reveals him, and that is the figure that rises spontaneously in our minds whenever we hear the word mentioned.

But there is another and a higher sense in which the word may be used of a man. There are certain tender, winsome, sensitive natures that work upon and within our social life, men who seem to carry about with them an atmosphere of peace and consolation, and sweet reasonableness, men whose strength is as the strength of ten because their hearts are pure, men whose ministry is truly sacramental and whose very presence in the church and in society is an abiding benediction. It is with these men (or with the creation of them), and not with the priest in the historic sense, that this discussion concerns itself. In them lie the salvation of the church and the hope of the world. If ever the day should dawn when we no longer expect or desire such priestly personalities either in our pulpits or our pews, then surely the final shame will have fallen upon our churches. For, as Dr. William Adams Brown reminds us, “the Christian ideal is not that of a society in which there are no priests, but one in which priesthood is a universal experience, each man bearing his neighbor’s need upon his heart, and unsparingly giving himself for his salvation.”

Here, then, however much it may mock and scourge us, is the personal ideal we should ever cherish, and toward which we should ever move. And what, after all, is this but the ideal of the Apostle Peter whose noble, inspiring words should be read in the hearing of the people at least once every year: “But ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that ye may show forth the excellences of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.”

## II

Now, apart from the sublime truth of the universal priesthood of all believers, the modern minister has still a peculiarly priestly function in the church in that he is the director of the visible forms of church life, the chief officer of the church as organized for the public worship of God. It is in the discussion of this that your sympathetic consideration is asked, for the task is far from being a pleasant one.

It may be remembered that when Cicero, to escape the vengeance of Clodius, voluntarily exiled himself from Rome, he crossed over into Greece and lived for a while in Thessalonica. One day he looked upon Olympus, where the rapt vision of the ancient Greek had beheld the radiant home of his deities. "But I," said the lofty Cicero, "saw nothing but snow and ice." It may be that you who read this will say: "Here is one who has looked upon the church with the same disillusioned and unpoetical eyes with which Cicero gazed upon Olympus." But it is not so. The church remains to me in a very peculiar sense the house of God and the gate of Heaven. Yet there are certain tendencies in the church life of today which cause one the greatest uneasiness, and which appear to indicate that we are in peril of making the church a house of Pleasure and a gate of the World. It is these tendencies which cry aloud for the restoration of the priestly function in our churches.

We have denied, and rightly, the special sacredness of institutions, of ceremonies, of *things* considered only in themselves; but in our iconoclastic zeal have we not almost lost the consciousness of the profound sacredness of life itself, and of the needy human spirit in the midst of life? It is a perfectly legitimate question of our day to ask if we have not forgotten how to lead the soul into the holy of holies where all its perplexities are stilled and all its needs supplied. The modern vice of egotism has put forth its last poisonous flower—irreverence; and its evil odor, sometimes even the blossom itself, has invaded the place of worship. "The decay of reverence" has become a cant phrase of the times. Both our religious and secular press exploit the phrase in a continual procession of depressing paragraphs. What is so

universally acknowledged must be a condition, and not a mere creation of the journalistic fancy. As a condition, then, it must be faced with what of courage yet remains in us.

It was prophesied of the Servant of Yahveh that, when he should come, he would "not cry, nor lift up his voice, nor cause it to be heard in the streets." That is to say, there would be nothing violent, nor hysterical, nor corybantic, nor of the wild dervish in his methods. How one hears the swift condemnation of many of our modern church manners in those ancient words! The straining after screaming titles for our sermonettes; the emphasis we lay on the wrong things in our church calendars; the "special features"; the extra special Sunday-night affair which with a pathetic sacrilegiousness we hope will catch the eye or ear of restless, volatile people; the vices of hysterical advertising which we have allowed to mar the simplicity and grandeur of our vocation; the enervating habit, caught from outsiders, of speaking of the pulpit as though it were a proscenium, and of our services as though they were entertainments—how all these things stand once and for ever condemned in the calm, sane, spiritually dignified method laid down for the Servant of Yahveh! "He will not cry, nor lift up his voice, nor cause it to be heard in the streets." No! for that is the method of the theatre, of the music hall, of the pulpit mountebank. It was the method of the false prophets before the exile, and has been the method of every false prophet since. Not so worked the Son of Man, the preacher of righteousness, the High Priest of our confession—even Jesus.

The worst feature of all these things is that they are flagrant violations of the divine purpose for which the church exists, and help foster the restlessness of soul, the irresponsibility of mind, the love of sensation, and the spirit of ego-indulgence which are the curse in all departments of modern life, and which in the highest department of all—that of collective worship—has resulted in a loss of reverence, of decorum, and occasionally even of decency, until there is sometimes little to distinguish the worship in church from a public meeting of any kind. The whispering, chattering, jolly congregation; the fidgety, flashy, self-complacent choir; the lounging, slovenly priest praying with one hand in his pocket; the bustling impresario who, for an awful moment,

has donned the robe of a priest—how far are these a caricature of the truth, and how much of truth gleams through the caricature?

It is the glory of our free churches that the ministers are granted a large freedom in the conduct of public worship. It is, however, a glory that carries with it a continual and perilous temptation. And the time has fully come to answer the question quite definitely whether the church is a social club whose members gather weekly to discuss their social engagements, hear some good or indifferent music and a lecture on anything from pseudo-psychotherapy to the morals of polar bears; or whether it is, indeed, the one Holy Place on earth where men and women come together in soberness and joy, in penitence and prayer, to worship and adore the Holy Father.

### III

It is to this that we now turn. The position maintained here is that the church is not for the purpose of entertainment, however high the quality of the entertainment may be, nor yet for the sole purpose of instruction, though that has a very noble place therein. The church is primarily for the purpose of worship, of adoration, of spiritual fellowship.

Here is the one positive need of the soul in these days to which the church must minister or cease to exist. As ministers, we can, if we choose, play baseball with our young men, run competitive "socials," manage boys' clubs, and by painful ingenuity keep up the other extra activities which a feverish church life forces upon us. We can also, if we choose, give them little moral lectures on love, courtship, marriage, and such like popularities. Perhaps all these things are very good. But can we, and do we, lead the ecclesiastically petted and flattered young people of our churches up the spiritual stairway of life to the heights where God is seen in his holiness, and felt in his grace, and known in his power? Unless we do this, and do it with unfaltering courage and persistency, the essential triviality of those other things will creep into our very acts of worship, and the hours which should be the consecration of accomplished work and the inspiration for future effort, will neither satisfy the souls of the people, nor confirm their faith, nor strengthen their will.

Adoration is not a luxury, neither is it—as Professor Carver so curiously reiterates in his pragmatic vision of *The Religion Worth Having*—a mere gratification of the aesthetic instinct. It is not an extra added to the common life of mankind, a life which would be just as beautiful, just as helpful, and just as inspiring without it. No! Worship is the necessity of man's being, something which belongs to him as a child of the Most High, something without which he cannot complete himself, but must remain through all his days a creature with starved instincts, narrow vision, and pathetic impotence.

The ideal of a church service, then, is that it should be the collective expression in acts of worship of the life of God in the soul of man. That ideal is fulfilled when men and women are made thrillingly aware of the presence of the eternal God in their own souls and in the souls of their fellow-worshippers. It is said that on the pedestal of the image of an Egyptian goddess these words were carved: "No mortal ever removed my veil." It is the function of the modern priest, as the leader of public worship, to draw aside the veil, to enable men and women worn by the fierce attritions of the world, weary and faint in the perpetual struggle with passions within and without them, to see the vision of God in their midst; of God the comforter, of God the redeemer, of God the continual inspirer of faith and works.

How, then, are we to recover and maintain the atmosphere of worship in our churches? Only, one may say, by a more severe attention to a multitude of details which we are in danger of neglecting. Will it do, for example, to speak of so simple, and to some minds so trivial, a matter as one's appearance in the pulpit? If he choose, the prophet may come to us clothed in camel's hair, with a leatheren girdle about his loins, and with sandals upon his feet. But the prophet-priest must observe the common decencies of civilized life, if he would lead his people up the heights. He may wear a gown or discard it, he may fasten his collar in front or behind—these are things of personal preference—but the eternal fitness of things demands that he be soberly clothed. Some attention also he will give to the appearance of the choir behind him. He may prefer that the choir be vested. It is not a vital matter. But this is vital, that the picture-hat and the flaming

blouse be banished from the choir loft. A giddily costumed choir clustering about the organ and a sharp business-looking master of ceremonies in the pulpit present at the outset very serious obstacles to the attainment of a reverential mood. And is it too much to hope that the time draws near when not only the choir but the whole body of worshippers shall appear bareheaded in the house of God?

Now the most important moments of public worship are the first five and the last two. Of what avail are a decorously clothed choir and a beautiful order of service, if the preacher himself be not a priestly person, aware of the solemnity and responsibility of his position? A lady told the writer recently of an experience which he would hope is not representative. Seated in church before the service began, the stillness of the waiting congregation impressed her, and a sense of reverence filled her soul. By and by the choir, a vested one, filed silently in. A moment afterward the minister came bustling in, bent for a flying instant over the pulpit, then announced a hymn in a loud voice. "Let everybody sing," he cried cheerily, "sing heartily; make it go." *And it went.* But with it went also every feeling of reverence from that woman's soul. Now one would not like to believe that this preacher even suspected that he was irreverent. He may only have been possessed with a disquieting fear of dulness. But dulness and reverence are not synonymous terms. If, instead of the first voice in that service being the preacher's, it had been the united voice of the church singing unannounced the strains of "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty," the sense of worship would have been retained and intensified, and it might have spread its inspiring influence over every detail of that service. Then those unutterably solemn moments when the minister of God pronounces the tender, exquisite words of the benediction—how careful one should be that no suspicion of haste or formality be permitted! Much may be forgiven us by our patient congregations, but for slovenliness and irreverence here no forgiveness is possible.

I can touch but lightly on the vexed question of the enrichment of worship. In our righteous revolt against the lifeless formalism of the past and the sacramental ideas imported into the liturgical forms of worship, we have dropped some things which

might now with considerable advantage be restored. A great gain of reverence would ensue from the addition of printed prayers and responsive sentences. These should of course be brief. The whole opening service need not occupy more than nine or ten minutes, but in those minutes the mind of the congregation would be drawn away from trivial and disturbing things and fixed upon the idea of worship; and there would be created that sense of oneness between preacher and people which is so necessary for the achievement of the highest ends for which we labor and pray. This, of course, is merely a suggestion. But it is a growing conviction of many that something must be done—things being as they are—to calm the mind and to create the consciousness of a common spiritual heritage in the restless, feverish beings who come to church for they scarcely know what. And it is only when this unity of feeling in worship is reached that the minister's special message can produce its deepest and most enduring effect.

Of that special message this is not the time to write. But there is surely a priestly function for the sermon also to fulfil. God hath committed unto us a ministry of reconciliation; how can this reconciliation be effected save as the consciousness of the holy Father's presence be deepened and not dissipated by the personal message of the preacher? Sometimes the prophet, overwhelmed with the greatness of his vocation, absorbed in the exalted ideals and ideas which thrill his own soul, or stirred to the finest fibre of his being with the fervor of his moral vision, forgets the sore hearts, the perplexed minds, and the weary bodies before him. The thing he has to say seems so momentous to him that he forgets that it is not only the word of God but God himself that we must recognize, if we would go from the church healed and strong and bravely ambitious in the things of the spirit. He beholds the strength and the glory of God, but not the weakness and need of men. Here, then, the human insight and tender sympathy of the true priest, as the atmosphere through which the prophet's message reaches men, is the supreme need of our day.

There is one great priestly function of which something should be said, for surely it is the highest of all. We are not always in

church, we have a great and very difficult private ministry. From childhood to old age, in all the crises of our people's lives, we have a place to fill which cannot be paralleled by any other class of the world's workers. What perplexities, what misfortunes, what griefs, what bitter shames are laid before us! And what the soul needs then is not eloquence, not brilliant scholarship, not dazzling social gifts, not even the passionate message of the prophet, but just the wise and tender heart. How many of us have failed just here! It is a bitter memory. For this private ministry of consolation and guidance nothing but the highest qualities of the true priest can suffice. Let us seek them anew in penitence and prayer.

Priesthood, then, as here so inadequately outlined, has nothing official about it. It is a priesthood not of gross and impertinent ecclesiasticism, but of consecrated personality. It is, indeed, as Dr. Denney somewhere calls it, "an element and function of Sonship," and only as such can it have any meaning at all. Here lies the problem of liturgical and non-liturgical churches alike. Liturgy availeth nothing, nor free prayer, nor free speech; but the character of the soul who reads and prays and speaks. We are discovering that the one supreme evil in the leadership of public worship is the irreverent mind, the unprepared heart, the undisciplined will. We fear the actor in the pulpit, the man bent upon impressing men with the exuberance of his eloquence, the sprightliness of his enthusiasms, the facility of his modernness. We fear the entertainer behind the altar, the irresponsible soul who has no high sense of his vocation, whose ministrations have no consolation in them, and whose presence has no abiding strength and inspiration.

Who is sufficient for these things? That must ever be our cry if we know ourselves. And so it is for the priestly *life* that we should incessantly pray and strive. We cannot lead the people into the holy of holies unless we ourselves habitually enter therein. We can only inspire men by the magic of superior spirit. The exaltation of the prophet may, indeed, be the creation of the moment's high vision; but the genuinely priestly spirit can only be the ultimate flower of the sacramental life.